

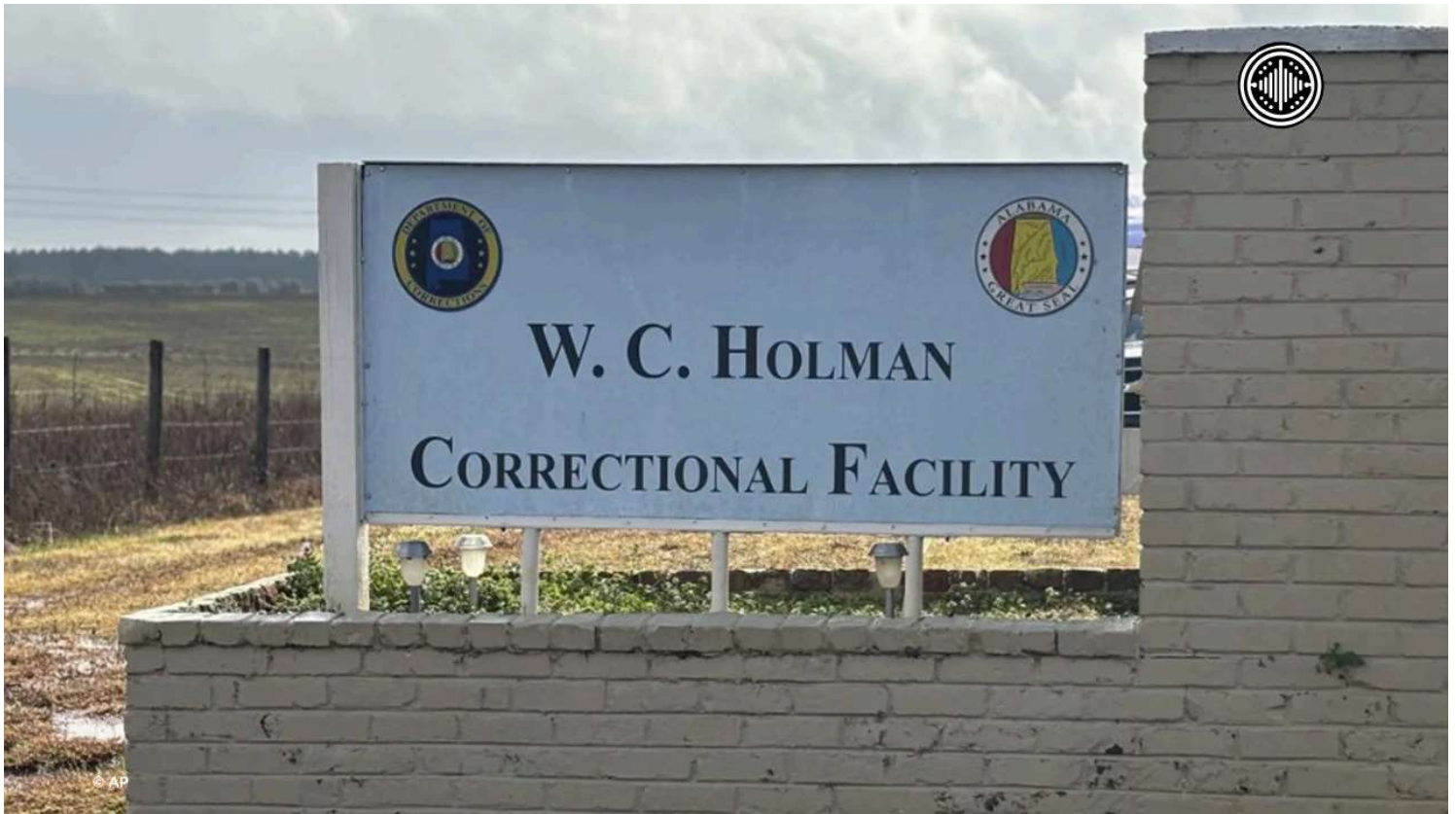
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Execution Halted for Alabama Inmate Amid Mental Competency Concerns

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— Categories: Crime



An Alabama judge has temporarily blocked the scheduled execution of convicted murderer David Lee Roberts to assess whether the inmate is mentally competent to face the death penalty.

Roberts, 59, was slated to be executed by nitrogen hypoxia on August 21 for the brutal 1992 killing of Annetra Jones. However, Marion County Circuit Judge Talmage Lee Carter issued a stay, citing concerns that Roberts may not fully grasp the nature of his punishment or the reason behind it.

In his ruling, Carter noted that the critical question is whether Roberts possesses “a rational understanding” of his pending execution. “Or similarly put,” the judge wrote, “the issue is whether the petitioner’s concept of reality is so impaired that he cannot grasp the execution’s meaning and the purpose or the link between his crime and its punishment.”

The stay will remain in place until the Alabama Department of Mental Health completes a formal evaluation of Roberts’ mental state. The state’s attorney general has not challenged the stay but has requested that the review be expedited.

Roberts’ legal team maintains that their client suffers from paranoid schizophrenia, a condition they say renders him incapable of understanding the execution process. In court filings, his attorneys described disturbing behaviors, including a recent attempt to burn off his own tattoos because he believed they were controlling his thoughts.

“This evidence demonstrates Mr. Roberts is incompetent to be executed because his delusions prevent him from having a factual or rational understanding of the reason,” his attorneys argued in their filing.

Mental Health Uncertainty

This case highlights the growing concern over how mental illness is handled within the capital punishment system. The Supreme Court of the United States has ruled that individuals cannot be executed if they do not understand the nature and purpose of their punishment. However, Alabama does not have a clearly defined legal standard for determining mental competency in such cases, leaving room for uncertainty in the courts.

The method of execution adds further controversy. Alabama recently introduced nitrogen hypoxia as a means of capital punishment, with Roberts set to be the second person in the state subjected to the untested method. In January 2024, Kenneth Smith became the first inmate in the nation to be executed this way. While some officials have promoted it as a more humane option, it remains highly controversial and largely unproven in practice.

Roberts was convicted of capital murder in the 1992 death of Annetra Jones. Prosecutors said Roberts was staying at a house in Marion County when he shot Jones three times in the head while she was sleeping on a couch. He then poured flammable liquid on her body and around the home before setting the house on fire. Investigators said he had also stolen money from the residence.

Although a jury recommended life without parole by a narrow 7-5 vote, a judge overrode the decision and sentenced Roberts to death. That practice has since been outlawed in Alabama, with the state no longer allowing judicial overrides in capital cases.

As the case proceeds, attention now turns to the Department of Mental Health findings. Until then, Roberts' fate remains in limbo, with the courts left to determine whether his mental state disqualifies him from facing the ultimate punishment.